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ABSTRACT

Eliminating errors is neither as simple nor as important as back-to-basics critics believe; however, correctness does need to be considered in composition instruction. Error affects a reader's judgment of writing quality and interferes with the communication between reader and writer. It may also hinder the composing process of some writers. Major attention to matters of correct form should be postponed until the final stages of composing--revision and proofreading. Instruction that prepares students to eliminate errors in these final stages should be based on research and linguistic knowledge. Such instruction should begin with helping students develop writing fluency so that the mechanical process can become unconscious. Other instruction should include language activities that ask students to generate and manipulate their own language, a direct or applied approach to teaching grammar, usage instruction based on current knowledge about language, a spelling curriculum, and information on how to revise and proofread. (TJ)

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Putting Correctness in Its Place

Any teacher who reads the Back-to-Basics critics soon detects two implicit assumptions in their criticism of student writing: first, that student writing is worse because of an increase in spelling, punctuation, and usage errors; and second, that writing problems would largely disappear if students were only taught the "basics" which would eliminate these errors. Many members of the English profession have rightly attacked the simplistic view of Back-to-Basics critics, arguing that their assumptions reduce the complex act of composing to a mechanical task of writing error-free sentences and citing research which discredits teaching practices - sentence diagramming, formal grammar instruction - purported to teach the "basics." However, we seem clearer about what we should not do about correctness in writing than what we should do. The need to find a place for correctness within our composition curricula and to integrate instruction in correctness within the composing process is urgent. The trend toward establishing competency requirements will only intensify pressures for greater correctness, at least as it can be measured by scores on multiple choice, computer-scorable tests. Unless we can develop positive alternatives to the programs demanded by critics, we are likely to be pushed into programs which are little more than gimmicks to raise test scores and to silence critics.

How important is correctness in a composition and what is its place in the teaching of writing? If correctness should not be considered a primary factor, neither should it be seen as unimportant or insignificant. Paul

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Diederich in Measuring Growth in English (NCTE, 1974) found that errors in sentence structure, usage, and spelling were one of five factors which influence a reader's judgment of writing ability. The presence of four other factors - the ideas expressed, organization, wording and phrasing (vocabulary), and flavor (the personalities revealed by the writing) - explains why improving only correctness may not result in a substantial improvement in the quality of a composition, especially if it is weak in content or organization. Moreover, Diederich found that the relative importance a reader assigned to each factor was related to his or her profession, with an emphasis on correctness most characteristic of college English teachers.

Errors affect the writer-reader relationship even when the reader is inclined to be tolerant of mechanical errors. Mina Shaughnessy observes that errors are "unintentional and unprofitable instrusions upon the consciousness of the reader...They shift the reader's attention from where he is going (meaning) to how he is getting there (code)." (Errors and Expectations, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 12.)

In addition to their effect on readers, errors hinder the composing process of some writers. Basic writers taking the composition placement test for the CUNY campuses were often unable to complete more than a few sentences, crossing out sentence after sentence to make a fresh start, virtually paralyzed by their anxiety about error. (Shaughnessy, p. 8.) This anxiety seems to affect more competent writers by distracting them from larger rhetorical concerns during writing. In an important, but little known study, Roger Hyndman compared the composing processes of average and above-average tenth-grade students. When interviewed, poor writers revealed that they worried about their spelling and punctuation while they were writing. Good writers, on the other hand, focused

on rhetorical concerns such as purpose and organization. (Some Factors Related to the Writing Performance of Tenth-Grade Students, unpublished dissertation, U.C.L.A., 1969.) Students who are not sufficiently confident of their ability in the more mechanical aspects of writing seem to have difficulty in postponing attention to these matters until the revision and proofreading stages where they can be most efficiently dealt with.

If we place concern with correctness at the end of the composing process, we must still prepare students to identify errors and to correct them once they reach that stage. Planning an instructional program to give students the necessary knowledge is hardly the simple task critics seem to assume. Such diverse errors as misspelled words, failure to mark sentence boundaries with periods, faulty word choices, omission or inaccurate use of inflectional endings, misplaced or dangling modifiers, improper subordination or coordination of sentence elements are all lumped together in the all-purpose category of error. Not surprisingly, the most effective instruction to reduce these errors is equally diverse, rather than a single all-encompassing method.

In addition to selecting the best approach to eliminate a particular type of error, teachers must establish instructional priorities based on the writing ability of the students concerned. Concentrating on one or two errors at a time will yield better results than inundating students with information about a dozen different errors and ways to eliminate them. No signle plan can be devised which will be suitable for all students, but the following list of suggestions can be used as guidelines for planning a composition curriculum which considers correctness as one component of instruction and integrates it within the total composing process.

1. Develop writing fluency

Increasing writing fluency may seem a curious starting place for a plan to improve correctness. But writing demands a close psycho-motor coordination among hand, eye, and brain which becomes integrated and habitual only through repeated practice. Mina Shaughnessy points out that basic writers' lack of writing experience leaves them laboring over mechanical processes that have become unconscious for other students and their effort cuts them off from their thoughts. (Errors and Expectations, p. 14.) Writing assignments such as journals or free writing which encourage a continuous flow of words, encourage greater fluency and help these processes become less self-conscious. For average or above-average writers, increased fluency achieves different, but equally desirable objectives. Journals break down the audience relationship James Britton describes as "pupil to examiner" and substitutes the "adolescent to self" or "adolescent to trusted adult." (The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), MacMillan, 1975.) These new audience relationships may result in less self-conscious language and encourage the emergence of flavor or voice. In addition, providing a writing context in which students are freed from anxiety about error may be an important step in helping them learn to postpone concern about mechanics to later stages in the composing process.

2. Emphasize language activities which ask students to generate and manipulate their own language.

The ability to analyze and describe the structure of a sentence is different from the ability to create those structures. Although critics have frequently advocated sentence diagramming or parsing as a solution to sentence structure problems, composition research has repeatedly failed to find a connection between skill in sentence analysis and improved sentence structure.

Two techniques which emphasize language production as opposed to language analysis are sentence combining and sentence imitation. In sentence combining, students manipulate language by consolidating several ideas into a single sentence. "Cued" approaches ask students to use specific syntactic structures, while "uncued" approaches rely on students' intuitive knowledge of syntax to complete the combining operations. Sentence imitation gives students a model sentence, then asks them to generate other sentences with a similar or identical structure using different content. A substantial body of research attests to the effectiveness of sentence combining in improving sentence structure. Less research evidence is available on the effects of sentence imitation, but some preliminary results suggest it is equally and perhaps more effective with certain types of students. (Sara D'Eloia, "The Uses - and Limits - of Grammar," The Journal of Basic Writing, Spring/Summer 1977, pp. 1-48.)

3. When teaching grammar, use a "direct" or applied approach.

Few research findings in composition have been more widely quoted than Braddock's conclusion that "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing." (Richard Braddock et.al., Research in Written Composition, NCTE, 1963, p. 38.) However, the same review identified one exemplary research study, much less frequently noted, which suggests a viable approach to grammar instruction. This study compared the effect of teaching formal grammar with a "direct" method of instruction and found the direct method superior on most significantly different measurements, including the reduction of common errors per 100 words.

The Braddock summary makes clear that composition and grammar were taught in both the formal and the direct method classes. The direct method, however, based instruction on problems arising in the children's speech and compositions, avoided

grammatical terminology, and taught concepts through examples and imitation, providing maximum opportunity for transferring grammatical concepts to the students' speech and writing. In addition to avoiding the abstractness of formal grammar, a direct approach gives students much needed help in applying grammar to their language.

4. Base usage instruction on current knowledge about language.

Correct usage is often described as "linguistic etiquette," a matter of good manners rather than basic language structure. Many adults, English teachers included, cling to the manners parents and teachers insisted we learn as children. Robert Pooley observes that "established rules may be in error" and "custom does bring about change in language" so that the "problem of correctness in usage becomes one of information and observation" rather than the continued application of a rule once learned. (The Teaching of English Usage, NCTE, 1974.) Any teacher interested in the question of usage will find The Teaching of English Usage to be an invaluable resource for the classroom teacher, including not only a background discussion of the concept of usage, an analysis of major usage issues, but also suggestions for effective instruction.

In planning instruction in usage, teachers must contend with two categories of errors: those usages usually considered to be nonstandard and those best described as stylistic preferences. Nonstandard English, although not linguistically inferior, is unquestionally a socially inferior form of English, and mastery of Standard English remains essential for nonstandard speakers who want to attend college and to enter certain professions. Whether or not a student speaks Standard English is primarily an accident of birth, and middle class white students require little instruction in standard usage by the time they leave elementary school.

Most instruction in standard usage is directed at speakers whose nonstandard language reflects the speech of their community and represents a logical, rule-governed alternative to Standard English rather than an inadequate mastery of the prestige dialect. Nonstandard usages such as the deletion of the form of the verb to be in the present progressive (She going to town.) or the use of multiple negation (sometimes called negative concord) are not the failure to observe linguistic niceties, but, instead, follow basic structural rules of Black English. (William Labov, The Study of Nonstandard English, NCTE, 1970.)

Teaching nonstandard speakers to use Standard English means teaching them new structural rules, not simply single word or morpheme corrections. Teachers looking for instructional models will find articles in the Journal of Basic Writing helpful, particularly the Spring/Summer 1977 issue on Uses of Grammar and the Spring 1975 issue on Error. (Individual copies can be ordered from the Journal of Basic Writing; Instructional Resource Center; 535 E. 80th Street; New york, New York 10021 for $2.00 per copy.)

Fairly substantial agreement exists among standard speakers as to which usages are nonstandard. Far less agreement will be found for those usage errors categorized as stylistic preferences. These usage items include such questions as whether we should continue to insist on maintaining semantic distinctions which are being blurred in contemporary usage (such as the difference between convince and persuade), or to extend meaning of some words (accepting alibi to mean any type of excuse in addition to its original, legal meaning), or to allow a word from one part of speech to shift to another (the conversion of the noun "author" to the verb "authored), to accept new coinages (balding), or to maintain grammatical distinctions frequently ignored (like/as). The Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage edited by William and Mary Morris (Harper & Row, 1975) illustrates clearly the lack of consensus about such issues. This dictionary used a panel of "136 writers, editors, and public speakers chosen for their ability

to use language carefully and effectively." The editors note that the panelists were able to agree unanimously on only one of the many questions they considered. A quick perusal of the panel members' comments which explain their acceptance or rejection of a particular usage suggests no patterns, but idiosyncratic reactions: a Martin Luther "Here I Stand" declaration against some items, a stoical acceptance of others, an ardent defense of a few.

Teachers will have to make their own decision as to the amount of instructional time which should be devoted to teaching these stylistic usages. Pressures for this type of instruction are likely to be high only in middle or upper-middle class communities where the majority of the students go on to college. Such instruction may benefit these students, but as the varied responses of the usage panel demonstrate, no teacher is likely to be able to prepare students for all the idiosyncratic usage preferences of future professors.

5. Plan and implement a defensible spelling curriculum.

Possibly because misspelled words are one of the most easily identified errors, they are inevitably seized upon by the public as incontrovertible evidence that schools are failing to teach the "basics." When students reach junior and senior high school, they often receive little spelling instruction because their English teachers are unprepared to teach spelling and because English departments have not developed a systematic approach to spelling instruction. Spelling instruction in many secondary schools consists of a grade level list of spelling demons, supplemnted by the teacher's marking of misspelled words on compositions. However, marking misspellings doesn't teach spelling; it only points out errors to the students. Unless students are given or must find the correct spelling and are then required to study and learn the words, they will derive little benefit from the teacher's conscientious identification of misspellings. Although individualized spelling programs based on errors in compositions can be developed, they are neither systematic nor easy to implement.

The grade level list is both systematic and easy to use. Furthermore, research

in spelling has found, to the surprise of many, that the word list, rather than words in context, is the most effective as well as the most efficient method of teaching spelling. The use of word lists should be combined with the corrected pre-test method which enables students to concentrate their study time on the words they don't know.

The problem with the grade level lists used in many secondary English classes is that they are at the wrong instructional level for poor spellers and for many average spellers. Word frequency studies have shown that 2000 words account for 95 per cent of the words children use in writing and 3000 words account for 97 per cent. Adult usage differs in that another 1000 words are added to reach 97 per cent. (Ruel A. Allred, "Spelling: The Application of Research Findings," NEA, 1977, ED 135003.) Common sense suggests that most of the criticisms about poor spelling result from misspellings of common, frequently occurring words rather than of esoteric words which occur infrequently. One may question requiring even the best spellers to learn highly infrequent words, no matter how demonic their spelling. The problem is greatest, however, for the less able spellers who need word lists at their instructional level. English teachers have neither the time nor the expertise to develop individualized spelling lists for each student. However, individualized spelling programs, developed primarily for upper elementary students, contain word lists organized by frequency of occurrence and difficulty level which can be easily adapted for use with secondary students.

6. Teach students how to revise and how to proofread their compositions.

Students appear to have considerable difficulty managing the final phases of the composing process - revision and editing. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 9-, 13-, and 17-year olds all tended to make stylistic, informational, and mechanical changes while seldom addressing problems of organization or transition. (NAEP, Write/Rewrite: An Assessment of Revision Skills, July 1977.) Although teachers tell students to revise and proofread their work,

most need to be taught how to go about these tasks systematically. (For a description of a successful attempt to teach ninth graders to revise organization and content, read "You Mean Write It Over in Ink" by Lee Odell and Joanne Cohick in the English Journal, December 1975, pp. 49-53.)

Sometimes proofreading and revision cannot be neatly divided into separate stages. However, correctness will probably be improved if students see proofreading as following revision and as primarily an opportunity to check for mechanical errors and correct form. When students combine the stages, the very different types of concerns appropriate to each stage seem to interfere with each other, reducing the amount of attention given to content and organization and directing attention away from matters of form.

To proofread successfully, students must be able to recognize the errors they generally make and know how to correct the errors once they are found. Readers often assume that the presence of errors indicates a lack of knowledge, but some students do not consider proofreading important enough to spend the time to complete the task and others miss errors because they are unable to concentrate on form alone. Teachers need to discover which students need more instruction in identifying and correcting errors and which need suggestions for applying their knowledge. One technique which helps students to focus on form rather than content is to have them read their compositions aloud, one sentence at a time, beginning with the last sentence and working backwards to the beginning. Another useful strategy is reading a composition for one type of error at a time.

Although the list above is not exhaustive, the guidelines nonetheless emphasize the difficulty of answering the question "What should we do about correctness?" Developing a composition curriculum which includes attention to correctness is not a simple task, but a challenge to teachers' professional skill and judgment. Integrating instruction in correctness within the total composing process and recognizing correctness as only one factor in writing will

not only put correctness in its place, but enable teachers to do the best job of teaching students to write more effectively.